

The Girl with the Book
Mushtaq Bilal

I

A new person had appeared in the J. Club: the girl with the book. Akhtar Saleem Malik, an old member of the club, had always had a special interest in new arrivals. Sitting in the Coffee Corner that day, he saw, walking on the lawn, a girl of medium-height, holding a thick book covered with an antediluvian newspaper. Afterwards he saw her in the library, and occasionally in the Coffee Corner. She sat alone and always with the same thick book covered with that ancient newsprint. No one knew who she was, and everyone called her simply 'the girl with the book'.

Locating her proved less of a problem for him than finding a casual way of starting a conversation. She was dining in the garden when he approached and took the adjoining table. As he sat down he realised that the girl with the book intrigued him for two reasons: the air of serenity and tranquillity that surrounded her, and that big book of hers which now lay open on the table.

He took his mobile phone from his pocket and without dialling any number put it to his left ear. 'Yeah, I was about to call you ... Okay, that's fine, tell her ... Or if you could give me her number, I'd ring her ... Wait a sec., let me get a pen.'

He rose from his chair as if he were going to attend to a matter of great urgency and approaching her table, indicated with a gesture that he wished to borrow the pen with which she had been writing notes in her big book. She did not reply so he took it anyway and wrote something on his left palm. 'Thanks.'

She glanced at him and then dropped her eyes at once.

'Looks like an interesting read.'

'It is.'

'You been here long?'

She closed the book but kept her right hand on the page she'd been reading. 'A week.'

'Welcome to Islamabad.'

'Thanks. There isn't much to do here.'

'It's a bit of a cliché to say the place is boring, but maybe you're right.'

After dinner he asked her if she would like to drive to Lotus Park for a walk and she agreed. Stopping at a red light, he glanced at her sitting on his left and realised that there was a subtle variance between the image he had in his mind of the girl with the book, reading on a lawn, and the person now sitting next to him. He started to explore this dichotomy but was interrupted by the brutal honk of the car behind signalling that the light had turned to green. After their drive resumed, he took her right hand in his left and placed it on the gear stick. She let him do that without any resistance or comment, and he lightly caressed her little finger with his thumb.

They walked side by side in the park and seemed to feel comfortable in each other's company but, despite his occasional comments, in English and Urdu, on the capricious weather of Islamabad and her enviable grasp of languages other than her mother tongue, there was no

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real conversation. He had no desire to murmur sweet nothings to her; instead, he had hoped to entice her into revealing important biographical details by telling her his own. After an hour or so she asked him if he could drop her at her residence on his way to wherever he was going and he, who had been looking for an opportune moment to exhibit the chivalrous side of his nature, readily agreed.

At home, he thought about her – about her mournful air, the tempting sheen of her skin, her well-shaped breasts, and about their next meeting – for he was certain that they would meet the next evening. As he slid into bed he wondered what kind of books she read, and if she was as ardent a reader as he was. As he fell into sleep he recalled her ripe breasts but most of all he thought about that big book of hers with its demonic cover.

II

A fortnight later they had made the sort of progress which most people would have achieved after the first handshake. Malik told her that he had a degree in literature, and a position in a university; that he reviewed books, mostly literary fiction for a weekly magazine; that he liked running and swimming; and that he owned a flat in Islamabad. From her he learnt that she was born in Lahore, but had lived in Karachi since childhood; that she was likely to stay another couple of months in Islamabad; that she was going to get engaged soon and her would-be fiancé, who happened to be a journalist with a European paper and so always on the move, might perhaps drop by in Islamabad for a day or two. She wasn't sure if it was a French or a German paper and had admitted her ignorance with a rare smile. Malik also learnt that her name was Fehmida Alam.

On an unusually hot Sunday afternoon, after they had eaten a delicious lunch in the airconditioned pleasantness of the J Club, Malik suggested they drive up to Murree. It was that time of the year when people from all over the country, in order to seek a temporary refuge from the simmering heat of plains, stampede by the thousands towards Murree. Fehmida and Malik ambled across the festive Mall, buzzing with a flurry of activity, looking at people dressed in their best clothes, newly-weds, walking hand in hand, packs of young boys ogling and hounding girls, kids running berserk, and parents quarreling with each other. They walked up to Kashmir Point and she looked through her binoculars, as though she were trying to locate something specific. She offered Malik the binoculars without removing the strap from around her neck and he, without any hesitation, accepted. The frugal length of the strap forced him to bring his face close to hers. Shortly thereafter a minor adjustment in her posture brought her left cheek in contact with his three-day-old stubble which must have been abrasive but she didn't try to move away.

On their way back they talked a great deal, asked each other disconnected questions, forgetting next moment what they had just asked, and an hour later entered Islamabad. He was about to ask her about that big book of hers when she said, 'So, where are we headed?'

'To my apartment. If that's alright.'

Silence.

He removed his left hand from the gear stick and extended it in front of her the way one extends one's hand in front of a palmist. She hesitated for a fraction of a second and then, timidly, placed her right hand over it. He held her hand, placed it on the gear stick, and pressed

her pinky ever so slightly with his index finger and thumb. She reciprocated the gesture, without looking at him, and in a greater measure.

She found the apartment airy, well-lit, a bit too spartan, perhaps, and dominated by clumsily shelved but neatly labelled books: fiction, poetry, history, religion. Malik threw himself on the sofa and closed his eyes. She sat close to him and asked him if he knew how to read palms.

‘A little,’ he lied.

‘Read mine then.’

He opened his eyes and sat up. He took her extended hand in his and suddenly put his right arm around her and kissed her on the lips.

‘What kind of girl do you think I am?’ she cried, pulling back.

‘You’re a real sweetheart,’ he said, a little embarrassed that he had made an unwanted advance.

‘I’m not the kind of girl you think I am.’

‘What kind of girl do you think I think you are?’

He realised the futility and stupidity of continuing, kissed her forehead and put his arms around her, brought her close and lay down on the sofa.

‘It feels so nice on your chest.’

‘Then I should take off my shirt.’

‘No, no!’

He took off his shirt.

The next morning he awoke to the sound of her weeping.

‘It’s wrong, it’s a sin, an unpardonable sin! I’ve made a grave mistake. Now you’ll think I’m a whore.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ There was a nail-clipper on the bedside table. Malik picked it up and started doing his finger-nails. Fehmida Alam’s innocence touched him but it was clear that she was extremely unhappy.’ ‘Let me do your nails too,’ he said.

‘You would not want to be with a corrupt girl like me.’ Tears began to flow. ‘But please don’t hate me, I am not as bad a girl as you think.’

‘Why would I hate you, love? You’re such a sweet little angel.’

‘No, I’m corrupt, sinful. Oh lord, forgive me!’

‘I think He’s too busy to listen to you.’

It was frustrating to have a beautiful girl sitting next to you, weeping, and whose feet had snuggled into your lap. Malik put his arm around her and she hid her face in his bare chest.

The next evening he found her – contrary to his expectations – in good humour. The mysterious book of hers was gone. She didn’t mind if he put his arm around her on their evening strolls, which grew lengthier. But on sultry summer nights, when she let him make love to her in his dimly lit apartment, he would have to work hard to get her aroused, and she would clench her teeth and shut her eyes during the culmination of the act.

A fortnight later, he drove her to the airport to catch the 4 p.m. flight to Karachi. Her sojourn in Islamabad had come to its end. They found themselves stuck in a traffic jam just outside the airport. They sat in the car with their hands together on the gear stick.

‘Will you miss me?’ she asked.

‘Why don’t you just stay here?’

‘I want to but I can’t. God knows, I want to stay here, I want to stay with you, live with you, but it’s not possible, I can’t.’

Why can’t you?’

She made no answer and looked out the window.

Half an hour later, at Domestic Departures, she said, ‘Let me just hug you one last time.’ She hid her face in his chest and broke into a flood of tears.

During the next month Fehmida did not return any of his phone calls. Malik realised how deeply he had become infatuated with her. He decided to fly to Karachi where he would attempt to gain access to that big book of hers. He was certain that the contents would help him understand certain aspects of her behaviour.

After checking into his hotel room, well air-conditioned against the oppressive heat of a Karachi summer afternoon, he went to the Central Library of which, he knew, Fehmida had a membership. The reading hall seemed to have sound-proof walls for the quietness of a morgue hung in the air. He spotted her eventually, in a secluded corner, sitting on the floor, reading. Around 9 p.m. she left the library and proceeded towards the parking lot. Malik, who had until now maintained a safe distance, walked up to her and, despite his thumping heart, said quietly, ‘Hello, Fehmida.’

She turned around, and he registered the guilty look on her face. He said quickly, ‘Let’s sit in your car.’

Her left hand rested on the gear stick and he placed his right hand over it.

‘You shouldn’t have come here! Why have you come here, why? It was so hard trying to forget you, it was so difficult I thought I would die and now you’re here!’

He squeezed her hand and tears began streaming down her cheeks. ‘I think you should leave,’ she said, sobbing. ‘It’s hardly the place to talk. Give me your address and I’ll visit you in the morning.’

He wrote down the name of the hotel and his room number on a piece of paper which she pushed inside the glove box. They sat there, silently, for a while before they had regained their composure.

Morning dawned. Night fell. And Malik – who had endured a frustrating day and an even more frustrating evening, for Fehmida Alam had not shown up, nor was he able to locate her in the library – found himself asking the concierge how he could procure the services of an expert thief. The concierge, a certain Mr Faisal, had spent all his life in Karachi and knew some of the sleaziest parts of the city like the back of his hand. Without hesitating, he scribbled down directions for Malik.

Around midnight, Malik arrived at a small black wrought-iron gate and, as directed, knocked twice on it with a coin.

‘Enter!’

Malik pushed the gate open and saw a man bent over a table looking at a wristwatch through a monocle.

‘Apologies for bothering you at this hour,’ Malik said.

‘Not at all. My hours – like my work and habits – are rather unconventional.’ The man removed the monocle before turning to Malik.

‘Unconventional?’

‘I don’t belong in the mainstream of thievery. In twenty years I’ve never stolen anything of monetary value.’ Malik was genuinely surprised. ‘My specialisation is in stealing things of

emotional value. And I wouldn't be doing this if it weren't for servicing society. So what's brought you here, my friend?'

'A book.'

'A book?'

'A thick book covered with an old newsprint belonging to a young lady.'

'That would seem to qualify. Write down the address where the book is located, and your address, and you'll have it by early tomorrow.'

The next morning while he was having breakfast Malik received an elegantly wrapped package delivered to him by a courier. He undid the layers of paper and twine and found a thick book covered with newsprint. He lit a cigarette, opened the book, and realised it was in Urdu. He read the title and muttered under his breath, 'So, this is what you've been reading!'

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